Floor Discussion

Kimberly R. Dane
Bureau of the Census

The first paper, presented by Charles Tardif of Statistics Canada, described the redesign of the Monthly Restaurants, Caterers and Taverns Survey (MRCTS). While all aspects of the survey from sampling procedures to production of the estimates were redesigned, the most important improvement was reducing time spent maintaining the system to provide users more time for in-depth data analysis. The redesign took the ideas behind the complex, user-unfriendly mainframe -- which originally met the needs of the survey -- to create a fast, reliable, pc-based system.

The second paper, presented by Patrick Cantwell of the Bureau of the Census, compared a rotating panel survey design to a fixed panel survey design for the monthly trade surveys. The issues examined included sampling variability, sample size, panel imbalance, response bias, cost, respondent burden, and the effects of benchmarking. Mr. Cantwell discussed the implications of a fixed panel on the next sample, to be introduced in early 1997.

The third paper, presented by Marta Haworth of the UK Central Statistical Office, described how the United Kingdom Retail Prices Index (RPI) was re-engineered to strengthen data quality and reduce sampling errors. The process involved a complete re-design of sampling arrangements; contracting out data collection and introduction of hand-held computers with validation at the point of data collection; re-development of the computer processing system; and review of reporting arrangements with large retail and service organizations.

Floor discussion was opened by Phil Kott of the USDA by asking Mr. Cantwell if a new sample is phased-in each year. A new sample is selected every five years, with an overlap period between samples to compare the new and old estimates.

The second question, asked by Lee Cohen of the AARP to Ms. Haworth, concerned the determination of the quantities purchased and how the prices were weighted by the amount of the purchases. The annual Property Expenditures Survey of 7,000 households is used to produce the weights for 80 groupings of expenditures. This is a typical practice for most countries, but market research information is also used to supplement the survey.

The third question, asked by Frank Yu of the Australian Bureau of Statistics to Mr. Cantwell, concerned the impact of the X-11 on trend estimates, particularly month-to-month movements versus trend estimates. Mr. Cantwell referenced the work of David Findley on variance of estimates and seasonal adjustment. The month-to-month trend and rotation is one purpose of the fixed panel design, because the coefficients of variation and the variance will be the same.

The fourth question, asked to Ms. Haworth, concerned the use of the business register in the selection of locations. In using the business register, they had to decide what the right unit of measurement was and how to capture those shops in the survey, since the business register does not reflect this information. Some shopping centers capture this information (the types of shops in the shopping center and the shopping population), which is then broken into postal areas and then studied. She found that one such source covered a satisfactory proportion of retailing turnover. This

commercial information is used to select the sample. The practical problems about sampling shops are if the shopping center is too large and where to send the enumerators must be very clear. To this end, they defined (within the postal areas) where shopping facilities are that should be enumerated.

The fifth and final question, asked by Richard Sigman of the Census Bureau to Mr. Tardif, concerned doing more with less, particularly decreasing manual operations and whether or not less staff was needed to analyze the data and maintain the system. Mr. Tardif replied that they haven't seen a decrease in staff yet, at this early stage, but they expect to over time.

With that, Anne Russell of the Services Division at the Bureau of the Census closed this session of the discussion on Improvements in Retail Trade Programs.